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Primus Goes to the Caribbean: An Amateur Radio DXpedition to Desecheo National Wildlife Refuge

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Jerry Rosalius, a long time Primus customer recently was a part of a great radio adventure. Jerry is an amateur radio operator. His amateur callsign is WB9Z. He is a DXer which means that he likes to make radio contact with distant and exotic locations around the world; however this time he was going to one of these locations. A trip like this is known as a DXpedition by ham radio operators. Jerry is also a world-class radio contester but that story is for another day.

A DXpeditions can take many forms such as from populated locations with infrastructure to completely remote locations where nothing is there except nature. The latter is the case for Desecheo National Wildlife Refuge. Therefore, Jerry and his band of radio buddies would be taking EVERYTHING needed to survive and operate for 14-days from this remote location with them.

Here's the story of Jerry's adventure.....

Desecheo National Wildlife Refuge is a mountainous island of about 360 acres and with a generally tropical climate is 14 miles west of Rincon, Puerto Rico. Desecheo was acquired by the United States in 1856. During World War II, the island was used as a bombing and gunnery range until 1952. In December 1976, Desecheo was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), which is now responsible for its management as a wildlife refuge.

Because of the critical habitat and Unexploded Ordnance (UXO), Desecheo was closed to all visitors in 1993. Also the relative location of Desecheo in the middle of the Mona Channel between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, drug trafficking and human trafficking are often problems. Over the last 10-15 years, the USFWS has had many applications from amateur radio operators to activate Desecheo. In mid-2008, the USFWS asked for proposals to be submitted for a Special Use Permit for amateur



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operation on Desecheo. Letters were sent to a number of individuals and groups who had sought permission in the previous years.

In October, 2008, the USFWS announced that the proposal submitted by The KP1-5 Project was selected for the operation. It was scheduled to take place in late 2008 for a maximum of fourteen days with no more than fifteen radio operators. Because of scheduling problems it eventually took place in February, 2009. There were many requirements that had to be met to enter the Refuge. One of the most important was the requirement that the camp site and all antenna locations be swept” or scanned for UXO. This added some additional expense to the operation, but from a safety standpoint, was absolutely necessary. An advance team visited Desecheo in December 2008 along with USFWS law enforcement personnel and a UXO technician. A safe perimeter was setup, antenna locations selected, and areas swept for UXO. They returned to their respective homes and modified our plans based upon what was learned.

February is “winter” time on Desecheo; there are no hurricanes at that time of the year, but the wind blows steadily and the western side of Puerto Rico is famous for its February surfing! In December, seas were often 3-5 feet or more, but in

February, the seas could be 2-3 times that! All of the radios, antennas, amplifiers, medical supplies and hundreds of other items were shipped to the storage facility during January. Jerry was a part of the antenna team because of his professional background. He was responsible for terminating 1500 feet of various lengths of coax. This is where Primus comes in. Jerry used Primus LMR 400 connectors, prep and installation tools to do the job. They all performed as advertised.



All of the plans were falling into place. Five days before everyone was to leave, we were informed that the helicopter planned for transportation would not be available. We were back to square one with transportation with only a week to go! To make a long story short, with less than 48 hours before our permit became effective, we found two companies, each with a smaller A-Star helicopter. So we were back to the plan. The equipment was staged for an early morning departure on February 12th. Instead of 4-5 flights with the first helicopter, finishing by noon, it took a total of 39 helicopter flights over 1½ days to get all of our gear to Desecheo! The helicopters flew until dark, and then returned in the morning to finish up.

At first light on our second day on the island, everyone was up again and completed setting up the operations tents, a few stations and enough antennas to get on the air. At 16:00Z... operations began! The best operators opened up in order to handle the huge pileups. John, W2GD opened up 20m Morse



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code and Jerry, WB9Z on 17m voice. 24-hours later, we had 10,000 contacts in the log as we ramped up radio operations.

On Saturday, February 14th, 'Camp Desecheo' was fully operational. There were eight stations, each with ICOM 756 Pro III's, Alpha amplifiers, I.C.E. band pass filters, and MicroKeyer II controllers. We used Win-Test for logging. Each station was set up to run any mode and use any antenna. An operator schedule was implemented and everyone started the daily routine of operating, eating, antenna and camp maintenance and rest. Sleeping during the day was difficult because of the heat. Once the sun came over the big mountain all the tents warmed up 20 degrees. On the warmest of days, it was well over 100 degrees F in the operations tent.

Operators worked three-hour shifts. Once a day there were two three-hour shifts back to back followed by a six-hour off time, then three hours on and three hours off and so on. Each person operated a minimum of twelve hours a day, some much more. On February 16 there was a supply run to bring extra water and extra fuel and to remove trash. Seas were 5-6 feet with 2-3 foot swells into the landing area.



The Zodiac was able to off-load without much problem. Operations were stopped for an hour or so to form a human chain to pass things back and forth. This made moving supplies over the extremely slippery and sharp rocks less hazardous.

On February 19, Team 3 was scheduled to replace Team 2, along with another gasoline resupply and garbage removal. The highest surf of the year was that day. Breakers came in and took down all of the beach antennas except for the 160M vertical. In the "protected" bay that had been used for the Zodiac, 6-10 foot breakers were rolling in! No one would have survived a landing there. There was no alternative but to go by air. Back on Puerto Rico, Team 3 arranged for helicopter transport from a third helicopter company. The team exchange then took place quickly and safely. It was another two days before the seas finally subsided enough to get a resupply boat near the island.

There was propagation to North and South America 24 hours a day on several bands at a time. There were good openings to Europe. The windows to Japan and Asia were short but they were the highlights of the day! The goal was to maximize the number of contacts to these hard to reach areas. Overall, 40%



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of our contacts were with Europe and Asia! We greatly appreciated the cooperation from North American hams in helping us work these high-need areas!

The total number of contacts was 115,787. 55% were on Morse code, 40% on voice and 5% on radio teletype. We made 51 satellite contacts, two 6M earth-moon-bounce contacts, plus a contact with one of the Mission Specialists aboard the International Space Station. We had 41,783 contacts with Europe and 4,202 with Asia. We had 32,807 unique callsigns in the log, a number we are most proud of. We want to thank the DXers in the audience for your support and hope you enjoyed the chase. If you are not a DXer or amateur radio operator, we hope you enjoyed learning about our adventure.

More pictures and more information about Desecheo are on the K5D website: <http://www.kp5.us>. A DVD Video is being produced and will be available in September. Order now for a discount: visit either www.kp5.us or www.k4uee.com/dvd.

